

Dark Empire Book Two

Infiltration

Chapter One

Planet Jedver, Galactic Council of Planets central world

“The team we sent to inspect Bi’is has reported in, sir. You’ve been asked to meet with them right away.”

Dramok Mereta, secretary-general of the Galactic Council of Planets, regarded his assistant Tulbayn with mild interest. “So soon? They don’t wish to wait a day or two?”

Tulbayn, an emerald-furred Joshadan who typically wore a serene smile, appeared disconcerted. “They insisted it’s important they report their findings to you as soon as possible. I told them it wasn’t protocol, but Commander Nezlo said you’d want to hear their news immediately.”

“Most extraordinary.” Mereta leaned his elbows on his polished desk. His long fingers wove together, but for the indexes, which steepled. He settled his chin on the fingertips, letting the gentle music of a Plasian string quartet enter his senses. Such beautiful music, a feast for the soul. He directed his attention to Tulbayn once again. “Nezlo didn’t ask to call together the full council for an emergency session?”

“No, Secretary-General. He said you should listen to what they learned first, as his report is of a sensitive nature.”

Mereta considered, reaching for the quietest part of his mind as his gaze drifted over an arrangement of pure white flowers on his desk. The Bi’is inspection team had encountered a situation important enough to bring immediately to him, but not to the entire council. Had such an occasion ever come up in the past? If so, he hadn’t heard of it, and he’d been around a very long time.

Alneusians, the species to which Commander Nezlo belonged, weren’t known for excitability. Mereta wasn’t well acquainted with him, but he understood Nezlo was held in high regard. His competence couldn’t be in question, as only the best negotiators and diplomats were capable of dealing with the troublesome Bi’isils. Troublesome indeed, despite being kept under the Galactic Council’s thumb since their attempt to destroy Mereta’s home planet of Kalquor five years prior.

“I take it I have time to see Nezlo, as my last appointment canceled.”

Tulbayn, used to Mereta’s silences and contemplations, treated the lengthy pause after he’d last spoken as if it hadn’t happened. “There’s an hour free before you’re to address the Appropriations Committee.”

“Can the commander come now?”

“He’s in reception already, sir. He and the rest of his team.”

Surprise sought to disturb Mereta. He acknowledged it without a tremor of irritation, merely interest in his own reaction. “The entire team?”

“Yes, Secretary-General.”

“They came straight from docking their ship?”

“That’s my understanding.”

“My, my, Tulbayn. I wonder what it was they discovered on Bi’is?” He leaned back in his leather hover chair and contemplated the softly illuminated ceiling.

“It must have been notable.”

“Indeed. I suppose I should discover what the excitement’s about. Will you show them to the conference room? I’ll join them in a moment.”

“Yes, Secretary-General.” Tulbayn bowed as a Kalquorian would, despite knowing Mereta’s objections to such demonstrations. She hurried out of his office before he could rebuke her.

He smiled at the door, which had closed behind her. Joshadans were a most remarkable race. Simple, kind, unassuming. Above all, forgiving. The galaxy could learn from Tulbayn’s people. Civilization would be a more peaceful place to live if its residents did so.

Mereta closed his eyes and sank into a meditative state almost immediately. At nearly a hundred and fifty years of age, much of his adult years spent as a Temple of Life priest, it was more accurate to say he deepened the quietness his consciousness resided in. Calm flowed through him and blissful silence filled his mind.

Whatever Nezlo and his team reported, whatever malicious mischief the Bi’isils were up to after five years of quiet, the universe remained indestructible. The knowledge ruled Mereta’s outlook on life and kept him calm, even in the face of calamity. His unwavering steadiness had made him secretary-general when he’d have just as soon retired to teach his disciples on Kalquor. Duty and service were his mandate, however, so Mereta had allowed the approximately two hundred member planets of the Galactic Council to set the burden on his shoulders.

A few minutes later, he left his office. His pace unhurried, Dramok Mereta drifted down a short corridor to the conference room in his professional suite. Its door was open, but he heard no sound of conversation. Odd.

He entered the room. He’d traveled several steps before he noticed the myriad aliens awaiting him. Or rather, the strange, dark shadows sitting upon their shoulders, arms or tentacles ringing the inspection team’s necks.

The door shut behind him. Tulbayn’s trill of a voice called from behind him. “Door, lock.”

Mereta swiveled, his official white robes whispering on the soft carpet. Tulbayn’s eyes, emerald to match her fur, gazed at him from a few feet away. Her kindly features wore cold dislike, almost making her unrecognizable.

A dark blob of shadow clung to her.

“Tulbayn, you aren’t yourself,” Mereta said. His gaze swept the rest of the group, the inspection team. “None of you are. Is this Bi’is’ doing?”

“You see.” Commander Nezlo, stood, encased in their protective exosuit. It sealed the Alneusian aquatic resident in seawater. A shadow was inside and outside, somehow present in both places.

“I do.” His peripheral vision seemed more detailed than when he peered directly at the strange dark shapes clinging to his visitors. He had an impression of scaled skin, studded by many eyes. “Do I address sentient creatures or controlled parasites?”

“Parasites!” a Beonid shouted as expressions of rage filled their myriad faces.

“A better word failed to come to mind. Obviously, you are intelligent entities. What is your reason for coming here? For summoning me?”

“He sees us. He isn’t phased, but he sees us.” Nezlo’s bulbous eyes, murky in the water he peered from, riveted on him. “It is not good.”

Mereta was suddenly aware of movement at his feet. He glanced down to spy a bulbous shadow sporting multiple tentacles climbing his robe. A dart of instinctive shock jolted his chest,

and he attempted to brush the creature off. His hand passed through it without any sensation of contact. Nor did he feel it tugging on his robes.

“I take this as an act of hostility,” he advised them as he continued to try to push the climbing creature away, as it continued to climb to his abdomen, then his chest. “I shall resist—”

It scurried up and over his shoulder. Then darkness rose, deleting Mereta’s sight and hearing.

But not his consciousness. He was in that place he knew so well, an inner space where peaceful bliss reigned.

It would seem I’ve been overtaken physically. He detected a note of fear threading the darkness and contemplated it until it faded.

Death comes to us all, sooner or later. The creature has my body. A portion of my brain as well, if they use me as they do the others to communicate. Ah, poor Tulbayn, they did this to you also. I shall consider this unforeseen situation and determine if there’s anything I can do about it.

I am one with All.

The All hear you. A distant call. The collected atoms of the All’s greatness in the conference room felt the separation keenly. They strengthened their bonds with each other, and the call was louder. *You have control over this Mereta.*

I do. A hesitation. *I...there is a portion of its mind closed to this mote of All.*

A shudder ran through the assembled. Separation was an abomination.

It sees us yet doesn’t enter between dimensions.

Another of the parts asked, *shall we perform tests to discover the source of the interloper’s ability?*

There was a lengthy pause. *The Mereta is of too much importance as our emissary. You can maintain control over it? It is in a position of great power, beyond the reach of its own source. The All requires it do as we command.*

I have possession. Only the small section eludes me...but it doesn’t prohibit me from the knowledge this unit (another shudder) contains.

It is good. By controlling this unit, we have access to the many species of this dimension. We will learn of them. We will stop them. They’ll pay for their desecration of our home.

It is good. I’ll first learn of those leaders we must control in this collection of units. Then we may destroy them.

After we have them destroy Kalquor, the poison source infecting our realm. Then the rest, so our home remains pure.

Death to the invaders and those who’d invade after them. Death to those in this dimension.

Their will was strong. The All was coming, and it would erase the Separate beings when it arrived, after they’d ensured the Separates posed no threat. The knowledge bolstered those who’d come before the All despite their aloneness, to ready for the erasure of the lesser species.

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Kalquor, Royal House

As Nobek Yuder readied to disembark the shuttle that had carried him home, the Imdiko attendant who’d seen to his comfort during the spaceflight bowed deeply.

“Welcome home to Kalquor, Imperial Father.”

Yuder managed a tight smile despite the outward show of respect. Perhaps the young man meant it. “Thank you, Imdiko Biba.”

Biba pressed a button, and the hatch opened. A ramp descended. A moment later, Yuder did as well. After three years of living in a Galactic Council prison, his stay broken briefly to attend his Imdiko clanmate’s funeral two years prior, he was a free man and restored to Kalquor.

The shuttle bay in the cliff serving as the Imperial family’s home was familiar to him. He’d known it from infancy, born the blood heir to the empire’s throne. The granite walls were polished as smooth as marble. The floor was flat, but it was graded for secure footing. Beyond the rock surfaces, the bay was a bastion of advanced technology thanks to its computer panels, glassed-in security area, and the sleek personal shuttles of its residents dotting its open space.

Yuder wasn’t forced to seek the face he’d missed most. His human mate, Tara McInness, rushed forward from the knot of Kalquorians, Earthers, and red-armored guards waiting to greet him. “Yuder!”

“My love,” he whispered in her ear as their arms wrapped around each other. Tara had visited him regularly at the Kefwis Correctional Colony, at least once a month, but she looked...she *felt*...different to him now that he was a free man. It was as if he’d not seen her since leaving the Galactic Council High Court in cuffs.

Loath to release her, he drew back just enough to look into her lovely face. Her delicate features glowed with joy. She was in her sixties, in Earther years no less, but a vigilant health routine and serene mind kept her appearance far younger.

“My heart,” he said. “Sometimes I wondered if this day would come.”

“Time is a slippery beast. Slow when we’re impatient, racing when we’d linger.” She smiled, her brown eyes twinkling. “Let’s discover how long we can stretch the minutes from this day forward.”

“Welcome home, my father.”

Tara chuckled and moved aside for Clajak. “You won’t let me keep him to myself, huh?”

“Sorry, Earth Mom. I’ve been counting the days until his homecoming.” The steel-haired Dramok emperor of Kalquor grinned at her, a sight to warm Yuder. Clajak adored his mother-in-law, and he knew Yuder still kept his deceased mother precious to his warrior heart. It hadn’t made it less difficult for Clajak to accept Tara’s role as Yuder’s beloved.

Perhaps the hurts had healed while Yuder was away. His son certainly seemed pleased at his return and spoke warmly. “How was the journey?”

“Too far for a man like me on a ship of such small size. I believe the Galactic Council’s penal system wishes Nobeks to return to their eager embrace. Why else would they stick a member of my breed on such a small vessel, unless they wanted me to commit murder?”

Clajak laughed and surprised Yuder by hugging him. After a second’s shock, the elder man returned the embrace, moved by his only child’s greeting. Even before the death of Clajak’s mother, father and son had butted heads more often than not. Had he been any less of a Nobek, tears might have risen to Yuder’s eyes.

Clajak stepped aside. His mate Jessica, who was also Tara’s youngest daughter, shoved past him for her turn. Slightly taller than her mother, the empress of the Kalquorian empire was similar in looks, but miles distant in temperament. If a Nobek personality could be proven to exist in a tiny human female, Jessica would be the prime candidate. As tempestuous as Tara was serene, her hug was enthusiastic. She beamed at him.

“Welcome home, my father. It’s wonderful to have you back.”

“It’s wonderful to be here with you. How many councilmen have you made cry since we last spoke, my fierce daughter?”

Laughter broke over them. Jessica blew a raspberry but hugged him harder.

The rest of the Imperial Clan greeted him: Imdiko Emperor Egilka, the steady intellectual, and Nobek Emperor Bevau, the deadly but compassionate strength of the clan. Yuder accepted their smiling reception while thinking of the vast differences between them and his late clan, with whom he’d ruled Kalquor for many years.

What a mess we made of it, at least at the end. Clan Clajak had to shepherd the empire through the war we started and through a civil war too.

Yuder was awed by his son’s clan and embarrassed at his own shortcomings. Three years of his life given to the justice system suddenly seemed a cheap price to pay for all he’d gotten wrong. If anyone else felt the same, they showed no sign of it. His family accepted him with heartfelt welcome.

Another waited to greet him. Yuder bowed to the sole representative of the Royal Council present. “Councilman Oiteil. It is a delight to see you again, though I wish I didn’t have to offer my condolences. My deepest sympathies for the loss of your Imdiko and Nobek.”

Dramok Oiteil returned the bow. “I had no idea you’d received the news. Thank you for the kindness, Imperial Father. We have a similar tragedy in common, being the last survivors of our clans.”

“I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I’m sure the Imperial Clan has extended every possible assistance you require.”

Beside Yuder, Tara rubbed her eyes and blinked. Her smile at Oiteil was tentative. Jessica’s attention on the councilman was intent.

Oiteil managed a shaky smile. “Of course, they have. Unfortunately, there is little which can ease the heart at such a time.”

“You’re kind to interrupt your mourning to welcome me home.”

“Work is my salvation, not that I consider this an onerous task in any way. We have so much history, you and I.”

“Indeed.” Oiteil, gray sheening his black hair, had begun his career as a Royal Councilman when Yuder was an emperor. He’d been a voice of reasoned debate, and Yuder had always counted it as a benefit each time he was re-elected.

Those days were far behind Yuder, but Oiteil remained a vital member of Kalquor’s legislative branch of the constitutional monarchy. The Nobek swallowed a pang of jealousy. He was barred from government service, though the Royal Council had pardoned him for his crimes.

He’d been raised to rule the empire and had also once been a member of the planet’s premiere global law enforcement organization. Both avenues were closed to him, thanks to the Galactic Council’s terms of release and his age.

How am I to fill my days now?

Perhaps a hint of the desperate fear he’d compartmentalized and hidden so well from himself during his incarceration showed. Oiteil leaned close and whispered so the others couldn’t hear. “You and I need to talk once you’re settled in. There is a great deal you can do yet for the empire.”

“You will hear from me soon.” Yuder tried to show anticipation for Oiteil’s kindness, but he was aware of the restrictions placed on him. He couldn’t even serve on an agricultural committee. Public service was no longer in his sphere.